

Living With and Beyond Cancer Information Sheet

15. Sexual Concerns

Both cancer and its treatments can often have an impact on your appearance and how you feel about it. Some people find concerns about their appearance to be one of the hardest parts of having cancer. People vary, of course as to how much of their identity is invested in their general appearance or particular parts of their bodies. This affects the impact that a changed appearance has on particular individuals. So there can be huge variability in terms of how people respond to changes in their appearance. The effects of treatment such as hair loss, weight gain, scarring etc. can impact on everyday encounters and lead to anxiety, anger, frustration and distress, but these feelings are perfectly natural and normal. Stress alone can lead to weight loss. Some patients feel that others see them as ill and therefore will treat them differently, whereas some feel that the change in their appearance is a constant reminder of the illness. It does not matter how large or obvious a change in appearance is, whether the person is a man or a woman, if the change is temporary or permanent, or how old they are, it is how the change in appearance makes them feel that is important.

How can I manage these feelings?

- It is important to recognise that your concerns about your appearance are entirely normal and that many others often feel the same.
- What impact does your change of appearance have on how you feel about your body, and more generally on how you feel about yourself. For example, how do you feel now when you look at your body? How have you been feeling about yourself since having your operation/treatment?
- If you find you have started to avoid other people because of how you feel you look, consider how you might slowly confront these changes. You might start by looking at the part of your body you are most concerned about. Look at it (and touch it) until what you see no longer has much of an impact on you. It may take up to an hour at first before you become bored looking at it, but remember that feeling bored by something means that you are no longer having such a strong emotional reaction to it. Do this every day until you feel more confident looking at yourself. In time, if you wish and it seems appropriate, gradually allow other people to look at this part of your body so that they can get used to it and you can get used to them looking at your body once again. Try to say to the other person what you are feeling so that they can reassure you.
- You may feel you need extra support (e.g. the company of another person) as you re-engage with normal activities that involve seeing other people. If you worry about going out it can be helpful to talk through what you imagine might happen and, importantly, how you would handle it. Talking about your worries can be helpful, perhaps with a family member or close friend. Alternatively, if you feel particularly stuck with your appearance concerns, you may find talking to a professional such as a clinical psychologist more helpful.

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- Resources/Information

Local Resources:

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| <p>Counselling Service Fern Centre North Devon District Hospital Raleigh park Barnstaple Devon EX32 4JB</p> | <p>Jess French, Lead Macmillan Cancer care Counsellor Tel: 01271 334472 (ext. 5672) Email: jess.french@nhs.net Web: http://www.northdevonhealth.nhs.uk/</p> |
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National Resources:

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| <p>Cancer Research UK www.cancerresearchuk.org General enquiries 0300 123 1022 Monday to Friday, 8am to 6pm (closed Wednesdays 11am-11:30am, weekends and bank holidays) Cancer related questions : 0808 800 4040 (speak to a cancer nurse) Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm (UK resident only)</p> | <p>Website contains a huge amount of information about symptoms, diagnosis, treatment, research and coping with cancer. There is a comprehensive section on how to support someone with cancer and managing emotions.</p> |
| <p>Macmillan Cancer Support Line www.macmillan.org.uk Call 0808 808 00 00 7 days a week 8:00am—8:00pm</p> | <p>Calls are free of charge from all consumer landlines and mobile phones plus all mobile networks. Please note that calls to this number are not free when made from outside the UK. If you are calling from outside of the UK call on +44 207 091 2230</p> |
| <p>Macmillan on-line Community</p> | <p>Online support— to share experiences or vent your emotions find others who understand—join today!</p> |
| <p>Marie Curie Support Line — Living with a terminal illness and looking for support www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support/marie-curie-support</p> | <p>Calls are free of charge from all consumer landlines and mobile phones plus all mobile networks. The Support Line is open Monday to Friday - 08:00am – 6:00pm Saturday -11:00am – 5:00pm</p> |

Other Resources :

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| <p>Macmillan Booklets:</p> | <p>Cancer and Your Sex Life Men MAC14767</p> |
| | <p>Cancer and Your Sex Life Women MAC14768</p> |
| | <p>Cancer You and Your Partner MAC12157</p> |
| | <p>How are you feeling? MAC11593_E05_N</p> |